

L.B.J. Unraveled

Psychohistory is the attempt to fuse the insights of psychology and psychoanalysis with those of history, and the big league of the burgeoning academic movement is the annual Wellfleet seminar on Cape Cod. At this year's closed meeting, such luminaries as Kenneth Keniston and Robert Jay Lifton were there. So was Erik Erikson (*Young Man Luther, Gandhi's Truth*), the founding spirit of the movement and the group. But the center of attention this year was Doris Kearns, probably the first aspiring psychohistorian to be prodded into print by her subject.

Kearns, 31, an associate professor of government at Harvard, is a former protégée of Lyndon Johnson. Unlike some psychohistorians who have roused skepticism with their long-distance analyses, she knew her subject at firsthand, and well. Her Wellfleet report on her book in progress on L.B.J., hailed as brilliant by several in attendance, grew out of the extraordinary role she played in Johnson's last years.

You Harvards. When Kearns met the then President in 1967, she was a promising young academic, a White House Fellow, and an antiwar activist who had just co-authored a *New Republic* article calling for Johnson to be driven from public life. Yet L.B.J. took a shine to her, personally assigned her to White House duties, and gradually confided in her. As the relationship grew, he pressed small gifts on her, including one electric toothbrush after another—twelve in all.

Washington sprouted with talk that L.B.J. and Kearns were lovers; but Kearns told the Wellfleet group Johnson's needs were psychic—and historical. The President poured out stories of his inner life, urging Kearns to write them, apparently in the belief she was his last best hope of reaching "you Harvards" who would write the histories.

Near the end, the broken ex-President told her of dreams, fantasies, childhood pains, and in a moment of revelation, said she reminded him strongly of his mother. "In talking with me," Kearns reports, "he said he had come to imagine he was also talking with her, unraveling the story of his life."

On the basis of these chats, Kearns postulates that L.B.J. was torn between his mother and father—with considerable anger and resentment toward both. Johnson's mother was a genteel woman who read Milton and Shakespeare to the young L.B.J. and forced him to take ballet and violin lessons. She saw her husband, a lusty small-time farmer, trader and politician, as a limited, vulgar man, and turned her affection to the young Lyndon in what Kearns calls "an emotional overfeeding that led him to grow

up thinking the whole world should accommodate itself to him." But when Lyndon was 15, according to Kearns, Rebekah Johnson turned off the affection, often ignoring her son for weeks, and indicated that love would have to be bought through achievement. Kearns argues that L.B.J.'s often obsessive contempt for books, ideas, liberals and gentility all bore the heavy mark of his ambivalent feeling about his mother.

Kearns says Johnson's decision to enter politics was a conscious attempt to reconcile the demands of both parents: he could be a doer for his father and "talk big ideas" for his mother. Pol-

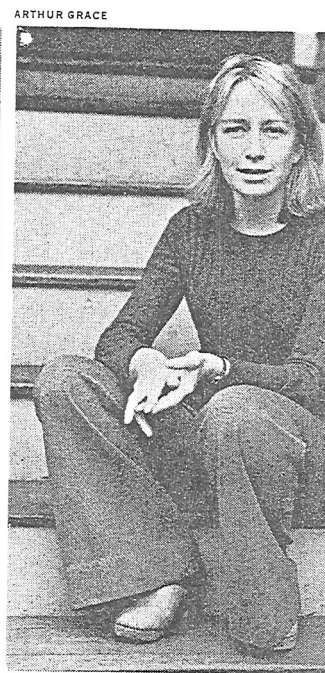
the carcass at his father's feet, then went to the bathroom and threw up. Later, Kearns points out, L.B.J. would mercilessly badger such visitors to the ranch as John Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey to go out hunting.

According to Kearns, L.B.J.'s obsession with Bobby Kennedy was even deeper than popularly believed. Johnson told her he feared that if he cut his losses in Viet Nam, Kennedy would outflank him on the right, arguing that Johnson had abandoned President Kennedy's commitment to South Viet Nam. Kearns suggests that Johnson may have had a special horror of Bobby as a man



REBEKAH JOHNSON & SON LYNDON, 1941

From L.B.J.'s last days, memories of dreams, fantasies, childhood pains.



PSYCHOHISTORIAN DORIS KEARNS

itics, in the Kearns view, became not only the search for power and the channel for conflicts but a way to earn love according to his mother's rules. "His entire self-esteem," she says, "rested on being admired." L.B.J. talked incessantly with Kearns of wanting to be loved. Putting his last hopes in history, he told her, "If the American people don't love me, their descendants will." Nevertheless, Kearns comments, "one of the things he deserves credit for is that his craving for love got connected to doing things for people."

Code of the West. Kearns contends that Johnson's boyhood fear of being a sissy and backing down (which she sees expressed in his Viet Nam policy) reflected the code of the Old West, which shaped his mind, and also various tests for manliness imposed by his father. Johnson talked of his youthful reluctance to shoot animals and how, when hectorated by his father, he finally shot a rabbit between the eyes, dropped

who met the same conflicting parental demands (be a thinker, be a doer) in a way he never could.

To Kearns, Johnson's fateful guns-and-butter decision of 1965 stemmed in part from his long-dead father (don't back down in Viet Nam) and mother (love of the people must be bought through the Great Society program), plus his own inability to accept limits.

As Johnson neared death, Kearns reports, bitterness and psychic pain led him deep into fantasy and to the edge of paranoia. He fantasized himself as the paralyzed Woodrow Wilson, dreamed his recurring dream of himself as a brave cowboy cut down by a stampede, and began to insist that Walter Lippmann and Theodore White were Communists and the TV networks were Communist-controlled. According to Kearns, he died still wondering why his country had denied him its love. All he wanted, he told her, was "just a little thanks. Just a little appreciation."